DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 815 EC 305 333

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TITLE The Relationship between Stress and the Causal Attributions of Mothers and Fathers of Children with Mental Disabilities and Autism.
PUB DATE Jul 96
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual World Congress of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disabilities (10th, Helsinki, Finland, July 8-13, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attribution Theory; *Autism; Coping; Family Influence; Foreign Countries; *Mental Retardation; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; Questionnaires; *Stress Variables
IDENTIFIERS Turkey

ABSTRACT

The causal attributions of 142 parents (80 mothers and 62 fathers) of Turkish children with mental retardation and autism for their child's disabilities were investigated in this study, which also examined the relationship of these attributions with stress. Parents were given a questionnaire designed to tap potential parental causal attributions for their child's disability. Results revealed that parental causal attributions were grouped under four factors: personal characteristics and conflicts with the family (self-family domain); spouse and others (external blame); external specific situations like work and environmentally related problems (specific external condition); and attributions to fate and bad luck. The level of stress in the parent-child relationship was significantly related to causal attribution. Mothers with higher stress were found to make attributions to bad luck. The age of the child, the type of disability, and attributions to the self-family domain and external blame appeared as significant variables for the fathers. Fathers who had children with mental disabilities rather than autism were found to have more stress. However, mothers had less stress if they had children with mental disabilities. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/CR)

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ED 401 815

The Relationship between Stress and the Causal Attributions of Mothers and Fathers of Children with Mental Disabilities and Autism

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Abstract

The present study investigated the causal attributions of the parents of children with disabilities for their child's disability and examined the relationship of these attributions with stress by using regression analysis. The sample consisted of 142 parents, 80 mothers and 62 fathers of childen with mental disabilities and autism. Results revealed that parental causal attributions grouped under four factors, which were, attributions to personal characteristics and conflicts with the family, attribution to spouse and others, external situations and attributions to fate and bad luck. The type of the child's disability and attributions to bad luck were significantly related to mothers' stress , whereas, the age of the child, the type of the disability and the attributions to the self-family domain and external blame appeared as significant variables for the fathers. The implication of the findings was discussed in relation to the counseling needs of the parents.

The study of factors associated with stress in families with children with developmental disabilities is a very important topic of investigation since it adds to our knowledge of needs and demands of parents. Several pieces of research have shown these families are susceptible to experiencing greater stress than the families with normal children (Holroyd and McArthur, 1979). Parenting a child with developmental disabilities may have an adverse impact on parents' well being (Cumming, 1976). The stress of parenting these children includes prolonged dependenecy and demands for special care, disappointments with delayed milestones and worry regarding future self sufficiency.

The measurement of stress includes the indices of emotional state of the family members and interpersonal conflict within the family and stressors can be defined as those life events or occurrences of sufficient magnitude to bring about change in the family system (McCubbin, Joy, Cauble, Comeau, Patterson and Needle, 1980).

Parenting the children with developmental disabilities has been reported to produce stress from varied sources, child, family, developmental change and the environment. Several studies have revealed that in addition to the diagnosis of the child, other factors are also related to the level of stress perceived by the parents (Byrne & Cunningham, 1985). These factors include the severity of the child's condition and beahvior problems (Donovan, 1988), child's age (Bristol, 1979) SES of the parents (Rabkin & Streuning, 1976) and parents' marital status (Salisbury, 1987).

The level of stress seems to vary from family to family but it appears at least partially due to the lack of prior preparation for the role of being exceptional parents. Family resources and the family's perception of the situtation are viewed as important factors that influence the families adaptation to stress. However, there are some other studies which failed to support a general stress reaction in parents and suggested that the parental stress was highly situational and specific to the anxiety-producing situations (West, Ginther & Zerkski, 1989).

The influence of the child with developmental disabilities on the psychological well-being of the parents is substantially greater for the mothers than for the fathers. Mothers seem to have a greater burden of parenting responsibilities and constructions on the personal growth and poorer health (holroyd, 1987) and were found to be at a higher risk for breakdown and parenting burnout than fathers because of their heavier burden in parenting the child with developmental disabilities. Furthermore, mother's stress levels seem to be more related to the subjective factors than to the directly measurable features (Byrne, et al., 1985). Also, spouse support was found to be related to positive outcome in relation to stress in both fathers and mothers, and indicated as the most important form of support (Beresford, 1994)

Although, parenting a child with disability may pose burdens for the family, the perceptions of the parnets also need to be considered in examining their situation. As Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman and Gruen (1985) pointed out, no event can be identified as a stressor independent of its appraisal by the person. According to the attribution theory, individuals engage in causal thinking when confronted with an unexpected and negative outcome and these attributions seem to be related to their affective experiences, such as guilt and anger (Weiner, 1986). Several studies have shown that internal causal attributions, especially perceiving one's own modifiable beahvioral characteristics as causes of a negative outcome are related to favorabe coping, whereas causal attributions to exteernal and uncontrollable factors, such as fate and others are related to depression and less favorable coping (Affleck, McGrade, Allen and McQueeny, 1985; Alloy, Abramson, Metalsky and Hartlage, 1988; Bulman and Wortman 1977; Karancı 1988). Faerstin (186) reported that 58 percent of the mothers children with disabilites felt responsible in some way for their child's disability. Thus, it may be useful to examine the relationship of parents' perceptions with experienced stress, with the view of modifying unhelpful attributions in counseling programs.

The present study firstly, investigated the dimensions of parental causal attributions for their child's disability and secondly, examined the variables related to the stress for mothers and fathers of children with disabilities.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 142 parents (80 mothers, 62 fathers) of children with mental disabilities (trainable and educable) and autism attending three special schools for children with mental disabilities and autism in Ankara , Turkey. Sixteen percent of the parents had parent counseling and training. In most cases, this was a short term parent training program aiming to help the parents to acquire the basic readiness skills to be taught to their children. The mean age of the parents was 41.90,(S.D=8.29). Their mean years of formal education was 10.43, (S.D=4.52). Other characteristics of the parets and their children are given in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Instruments

The instruments were prepared as booklets consisting of three parts. The first part was a demographic information sheet on which subjects recorded their marital status, age, years of education their parental counseling experience, tehir child's age, gender and type of the disability. The second part was a measure of the family stress. The Questionnaire on resources and Stress-Short Form (IRS) developed by Holroyd and adapted to be used in Turkish samples (Akkök, 1989)). The QRS consists of 66 items which requires respondents to provide true or false answers, concerning a variety of problem areas for the respondent, family and the family member with the disability (range is 0-66). The third part consisted of 27 items designed to tap potential parental causal attributions for their child's disability (i.e. lack of will power, the maladaptive cognitions, financial difficulties, etc.,) the items were mainly derived from the levels of attribution and change scale developed by Norcoss, Prochaska, Guadognoli and DiCliment (1984) and was previously employed with Turkish samples (Karancı, 1986, 1988). Items on interpersonal and family conflicts, financial and health problems, environmental adversity, ill fate and bad luck and various personal attributes (behavioral

cognitive and characterological) were rated by the parents on a 5-point Likert scale, for their extent of applicability to the development of their child's disability (1= is not applicable at all, 5= very applicable)

Procedure

Initially parents were requested to attend a meeting to be held by the researchers in the schools. During these meetings, the researchers explained the purpose of the study, gave information about the instruments and asked for the parents' consent to participate in the study. 95 percent of all the parents attending the meeting agreed to take part in the study. Subsequently,the instruments and stamped return envolopes were posted to the parents. The return rate for the completed questionnaires was 85%.

Results

Dimensions of Casual Attributions

The Casual Attribution Questionnaire item scores were subjected to factor analysis using the SPSS varimax rotated orthogonal analysis subprogram (Nie, Hull, Jenkings, Steinbrenner and Bent, 1976). The analysis yielded six factors accounting for 68.0 % of the total variance. After excluding 2 items which had low factor loadings on all factors, the analysis was repeated the new analysis yielded 4 factors (eigenvalues greater then 1.25) accounting for 62.7 % of the total variance. All items, except one, had factor loading greater than 0.45. Table 2 presents these factors, their items, factor loadings, and Cronbach alpha estimates of the factors.

Insert Table 2 here

The first factor was characterized by personal characteristics and conflicts and characteristics of the family of origin (self-family domain), the second factor included attributions to spouse and interpersonal problems (external blame), the third reflected external specific situations like work and environment related problems (specific external

condition), and finally, the fourth factor was charcterized by the attributions to ill fate and bad luck (bad luck and ill fate).

Predictors of Stress in mothers and fathers

The contributions of casual attributional dimensions, sociodemographic variables of the parent and the child with developmental disabilities as predictors of the stress were examined separately for mothers and fathers by using the multiple regression analysis program of SPSS. The results of mothers and fathers are shown in Table 3 and 4.

Insert Table 3 and 4 here.

In order to examine the relationship of causal attribution with stress after controlling for the effects of sociodemographic variables of parents, years of formal education, age and parental counseling experience (dummy variable) were entered first followed by the characteristics of the children, the age of he child and type of the child's disability (dummy variables: trainable=1, autistic=0, educable=1)in the second step. The three causal attributional dimensions (self-family domain, external balme, and bad luck and ill fate) were entered in the last step. Attribution scores realted to specific external conditions and the gender of the child were excluded form the analyses since their correlation coefficients with the stress were less than .0.10.

As can be seen from Table 3, the variables explained 15 percent of the variance in mothers stress. Variables with significant unique contribution were the type of the child's disability (having an educable as compared to an autistic child) and attributions to bad luck. For the fathers' stress level, the model explained 61 percent of the variance in stresss. Age of the child, type of the child's disability (educable compared to autistic and trainable compared to autistic) and atttribution to the self-family domain and external blame appeared as the significant variables.

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Discussion

The present findings revealed that parental causal attributions can be grouped under four content areas which self-family domain, external blame, attribution to the specific external conditions and finally bad luck and ill fate. It is interesting to note that self and family attributions appeared under one factor. This finding is consistent with previous studies on the causal attributions of Turkish patients (Karancı, 1986) and seems to support the studies showing the mutual reciprocity and fusion between the family and the individual and the important role of the family for the Turkish parents. Faerstein (1986) also reported that a high percentage of the mothers of children with disabilities felt responsible for their child's disability. The present results seem to be in line with this finding since self-family attributions explained the greatest percent of the total variance in causal attributions. The results point out that parents seem to attribute the cause either to factors internal to themselves like self-family or external like spouse and environmental conditions. Thus, two poles, internal versus external seem to be present. The dimensions of ill fate and bad, luck may represent an internal of external pole depending on its unique meaning for the parents. This point needs to be investigated further in future research.

The results of the regression analyses for the mothers and fathers showe that parental causal attributions were important varibles related to stress. However, attributions associated with stress seemed to be different for the mothers and for the fathers. The variance in the stress of fathers was explained by the age of the child, the type of the child's disability, self-family and external blame attribution, whereas the variance of mothers was explained by the type of the child's disability and bad luck and ill fate. Specifically, attributions to bad luck were found to be positively associated with stress in mothers. On the other hand, for fathers attributions to the self-family domain were negatively and external blame were positively related to stress scores. Bad luck and exernal blame can be taken as factors that are difficult to modify and control by the parents and thus these results seem to be in line with the revised helplessness theory of depression. (Alloy, et. al., 1988) which suggests that perceptions of uncontrollability are related with helplessness. On the other hand, attributions to self-family domain, which

may be perceived as controllable and modifiable were negatively associated with stress for fathers

The relationships between causal attributions and stress noted in the present study seem to support Lazarus et al's (1985) view on the importance of the individual's perceptions in determining the stressfulness of specific events Thus, in parent counseling it may be helpful to give the parents the opportunity to express their causal attributions and to modify causal attributions that may affect their stress In parental counseling, it may be important to examine mothers' or fathers attributions' separately, since the results seem to point out that different attributions are related to stress for the mothers and fathers

The type of the disability appeared as another significant variable influencing both mothers' and fathers' stress However, the direction of the association appeared different in mothers and fathers For mothers, having a child with educable mental disability as compared to a child with autism was negatively associated with stress, whereas for the fathers both having a child with mental disability as compared to a child with autism was positively related to stress In other words, for mothers, having a child with educable mental disabilities created less stress than having a child with autism This is in line with Holroyd et al.'s (1976) study which suggested that parents of children with autism experience more stress For fathers, having a child with mental disabilities created more stress than having a child with autism

In conclusion, parental attributions seemed to be grouped under four content areas and these attributions seem to be related to stress both in mothers and in fathers Based on the results of this study, it could be suggested that parent counseling services should be extended and made available to more exceptional parents so that parents will have a chance to explore their causal attributions for their child's disability and modify them

It is recommended that future studies should explore the spontaneous causal attributions as well as the specified ones Furthermore, the stress indicators of mothers and fathers could be examined

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Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

		N	M	SD
Parental counseling (mothers)	Yes	15	-	-
	No	65		
Parental counseling (fathers)	Yes	8		
	No	54		
Age of mother			40 21	7 83
Age of father			43 78	8 10
Type of handicap	Autistic	26	-	-
	Trainable	36	-	-
	Educable	38	-	-
Age of child			12 76	8 67

Table 2 Items belonging to the four causal attributional factors (The development of my child's handicap was partly due to....) *

Item		Loading
	Factor 1 Self-Family Domain (70 5 % Cronbach alpha = 0 91)	
3	My lack of willpower	50
4	My malnutrition	69
5	The unpleasant properties of the environment in which I live	47
7	My physical makeup	50
11	A particular characteristics of mine	73
13	Physical characteristics that I've inhereted from my family	79
15	My maladaptive cognitions	67
16	The fact that I don't get along with my mother/father or siblings	80
17	My inability to adjust to the society	67
18	Problems in my family that weren't related to me	48
20	My financial difficulties	53
21	My poor general health	74
	Factor 2 External Blame (10 6 %, Cronbach alpha = 0 86)	
22	Conflict in my work	59
23	Other people	50
24	The fact that I expect to much from myself	79
25	The fact that I don't share my feelings with others	82
26	My spouse's bad habits	71
27	My spouse's physical condition	62
	Factor 3 Specific external condition (9 2 % , Cronbach alpha = 0 68)	
8	A property of the environment or society in which I live	37
12	My work conditions	60
19	A specific situation I experienced	70
	Factor 3 Bad luck and ill fate (5 4 %, Cronbach alpha = 0 66)	
1	My bad	77
6	Factors I couldn't control	45
9	My ill fate	69

* all items were preface with this phrase

Table 3 Predictors of Mother's Stress

Total number of predictos	Significant predictors	r	Beta	r^2 change	F
8 ($\bar{R}^2$ = 48)	Type of the child's disability Educable = 1 autistic = 0	- 45	- 51	.06	4.78*
	Bad Luck	.41	.34	.09	5.25*
	R^2 = 0.15				

Table 4 Predictors of Father's Stress Level

Total number of predictos	Significant predictors	r	Beta	r^2 change	F
8($\bar{R}^2$ = 77)	Age of child	- 59	- 84	.24	25.34**
	Type of the child's disability trainable 1 autistic 0	.40	.50	.07	15.29**
	educable 1 Self-family	.37	.51	.07	9.58**
		.09	- 29	.02	4.81**
	External Blame	.41	.61	.21	21.87**
	R^2 = 0.61				